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An Inscribed Amulet from Shabwa

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This article discusses an inscribed golden pendant with a Hadhramitic inscription which was used as an amulet. The article also discusses the female deity *ʾlhtn* "the goddess" which is attested for the first time in South Arabian inscriptions.

This inscribed object is a pendant made of gold in the form of a crescent moon. It is inscribed with a Hadhramitic inscription consisting of two lines from right to left. This amulet is registered as having been found in Shabwa in 1954, and was presented to the British Museum by Dr. R. Beydoun in 1962. It has the number BM 132998. The reading of the inscription by the curator at the British Museum is as follows: 1. *ḥwl* / *ʾlḥtn* /ᶜ 2. *lhy* / *bᶜlt* / *šhrn*. The second word must be read as *ʾlhtn* since the third letter is clearly /*h*/ and not /*ḥ*/. It measures: 11/16×5/8 mm. This object could perhaps be dated to the 2nd century AD. The reading of the inscription is as follows:

Transliteration:
1. *ḥwl* / *ʾlhtn* /ᶜ
2. *lhy* / *bᶜlt* / *šhrn*

Translation:
1. The (magical)power of Ilāhatān be
2. upon Baᶜlat Šahrān

The word *ḥwl* is understood by the curators at the British Museum to be the name of the god *ḥwl*, a Hadhramitic moon god, and they believe this must be a dedication to that god. The word *ʾlhtn* which follows the word *ḥwl* makes it difficult to comprehend *ḥwl* as a divine name. The word *ʾlhtn* means "the goddess" and was originally used as a designation of a specific deity. Later, and as is clear in our inscription, *ʾlhtn* is a proper name. Since the word *ʾlhtn* must be considered as the proper name of a divine female and the occurrence of two proper names for the same deity following each other is untenable, the word *ḥwl* must be considered here not to be a deity's name. Even if we accept the identification of the word *ḥwl* as the name of the god *ḥwl*, the interpretation of the other part of the inscription has still not been solved.

This inscription belongs to a small group of South Arabian inscriptions which can be defined as amulet or talisman inscriptions. Some of them have been gathered and reinterpreted by J. Ryckmans (1). However, these texts are different from other categories of South Arabian inscriptions, they have their own characteristics and the interpretation of some of them is very difficult.

Amulets or talismans are defined as objects or artefacts believed to possess magical powers which protect their bearer against any kind of danger, bring good fortune and strengthen his or her potentialities (2). The colour, form and material out of which amulets or talismans are made are of great importance. Some colours and ma-

terials are believed to have apotropaic power. Carrying amulets in the form of solar discs or crescent moons was believed to give their bearer protection and power from the sun and the moon. Amulets inscribed with magical words or charms increased their effectiveness for the wearer. Amulets made of gold or silver were thought to be very effective (3). It should be noted that gold is a symbol of the sun and silver a symbol of the moon (4). In addition to the solar, yellow colour of gold there is also the silver colour of the moon (5).

Our amulet is inscribed with magical words which indicate the powerful meaning it had for its wearer. This pendant appears to have been a part of a necklace worn by a woman. However, a gold necklace has also been found in the cemetery of Timnaᶜ, which has a similar, inscribed gold pendant (6). A collection of Qatabanian jewellery has also been discovered, containing beads, earrings and golden necklaces (7). Collections of jewellery have been discovered in Mesopotamia and Syria-Palestine. Some of them contain symbols of divinities and can be compared with those found in South Arabia. A gold necklace with different forms of amulets such as solar discs and moon crescents has been discovered in Babylonia (*c*.19th–18th century BC). In addition, Assyrian kings used to wear necklaces consisting of metal amulets and symbols of deities in the Neo-Assyrian period (8). In Tell al-ᶜUǧūl, near Gaza, a similar gold pendant from the Late Bronze age has also been discovered (9). A crescent is a symbol of the moon god in Southern Arabia (10) and a well-known emblem of the moon god Sîn in Mesopotamia (11). Our amulet is made of gold which symbolises the sun and has the crescent form symbolising the moon.

ḥwl ᵓlhtn: The word *ḥwl* must be interpreted according to Arabic. In Arabic, *ḥawl* and *ḥayl* have the same meaning "strength, power, might and force" and can also mean "it is in the soul and the body and the acquisitions" (12). The word *ḥwl* meaning "power" is not attested in South Arabian inscriptions (13). However, the word *ḥyl* occurs there with the meaning of "power" and "might" (14). Moreover, the word *ḥyl* seems to be a common West-Semitic word (15). There is another possibility in interpreting the word *ḥwl*. The verb *ḥāla* (*ḥwl*) in Arabic means "to change, be transformed, to turn and to avert" which could give the feeling of protection. This means *ḥwl ᵓlhtn* could be understood as "protection of *ᵓlhtn*". But I would prefer the first meaning of "power".

The construction *ḥwl ᵓlhtn* can be compared with inscriptions which have been found on amulets. The following is a good example:

(A) 1. *ḥgr / ᶜzyn / w* 2. *ltnᶜly / r* (B) 3. *fᵓnṯhw / b* 4. *mhbᵓsm*. "Protection of ᶜUzzyān (al-ᶜUzzā) and Lātān (al-Lāt) be upon Rafaᵓnīṯahw against misfortune".

The correct interpretation of this inscription is due to J. Ryckmans (16). On the Shabwa amulet the word *ḥwl* occurs instead of *ḥgr* as an indication of its function. There are two different types of South Arabian amulets. The first one is inscribed with the word *ḥgr* and can be classified as an amulet for protection. The other type is inscribed with the word *ḥwl* and must be understood as an amulet of power. The power of the goddess is, however, to give strength to the person who wears the amulet.

In Arabic traditions there are some well-known expressions using the word *ḥawl*, e.g. *lā ḥawla wa-lā quwwata illā billāh* "There is no strength, nor power but in, or by means of god" and many other similar sayings (17).

The second *ḥwl*-amulet of this type can be seen as a reinterpretation of a magical formula found with two other magical formulae inscribed on a jar rim. The first formula *ḥlʾb* has been interpreted as "(The god) *ḥwl* is father". I would prefer the translation "(magical) power of the father". This translation is supported by the compound South Arabian names like *ḥlʿṯt* which means "power of ʿAṯtar" and has nothing to do with the Hadhramitic god Ḥawl (18).

The interpretation of the word *ḥwl* might be relevant to the term *Elkesai *ḥyl ksy* in the Gnostic. It is interpreted according to the word *ḥyl* "power" and translated as "verborgene Kraft" (19). Of importance is the appearance of the word *ḥyl* as an opening formula: *bḥylyh drbh* ... "By the power of the great one ..." in Late Aramaic incantation texts (3rd–6th century AD) (20). Furthermore, the root *ḥwl* occurs as a Semitic loan-word in Egyptian texts (21).

W. W. Müller proposes that the first word in this inscription could be the Hadhramitic divinity Ḥawl (22). However, the divine name Ḥawl appears in Hadhramitic (23) and is also mentioned in a Sabaic inscription (24), but there is no concrete information about this deity.



Fig. 1.
BM 132998.



Fig. 2.
BM 132998.

The second word *ʾlhtn* in this inscription means "the goddess". This must be considered as a divine name for a female deity called Ilāhatān which may also be read as Alāhatān. Indeed, this is the first attestation of this goddess. It has the South Arabian determinative *-n* (*ʾlht+n*) just like *ʿzyn* (al-ʿUzzā) and *ltn* (al-Lāt).

Using the epithet *ʾlhtn* is an indication of the importance of that goddess. The epithet al-Ilāha in North Arabia was an epithet of the sun goddess and at the same time was used also as a proper name (25) and for the North Arabian goddess Allāt (26). The etymology of Allāt goes back to al-Ilāha. The Arabian goddess Allāt is mentioned by Herodotus as Alilat (ʾΑλιλάτ) (27), which corresponds to al-Ilāha (al-Ilāhatu) and not to the later form of the Arabian goddess Allāt. In this context, it may be assumed that the name Allāt derives from al-Alāhatu and not al-Ilāhatu, a form which is attested in the Arabic tradition. The epithet has also once been used for the North Arabian goddess al-ʿUzzā in a Nabataean inscription, *ʾlʿzʾ ʾlhtʾ* "al-ʿUzzā the goddess" (28).

Arab sources proved that al-Ilāha and al-Alāha are names of the sun (29). Al-

Qurṭubī writes in his commentary on the Qurʾān that Ibn ʿAbbās and others read Ilāhatuka "your goddess" instead of ālihatuka "your gods" in a Qurʾān verse (30). Quṭrub also quotes the reading of Ibn ʿAbbās in this verse and has interpreted this to mean that al-Ilāha is the sun. Furthermore he writes that al-Ilāha and al-Alāha are names for the sun (31). Meanwhile, the goddess al-Ilāha appears in pre-Islamic poetry. In the following verse al-Ilāha clearly means the sun (32):

tarawwaḥnā mina l-Laʿbāʾi ʿaṣran
wa-aʿǧalnā l-ilāhata an taʾūbā
We came back from al-Laʿbāʾ in the afternoon, and we hurried before the goddess set.

This verse is part of a poem pronounced by Āmina bint ʿUtaiba. In this poem she eulogises her father who was killed at yaum ʿAin Ḏuʾāb (33). No doubt al-Laʿbāʾ, in this verse, is the place name where this fight might have taken place.

The pre-Islamic Arabs used to vow by the goddess (al-Ilāha). An-Naǧīramī describes al-Ilāha in his book about Arabic oaths and vows in the pre-Islamic period as follows: *lā wa-muǧrī l-ilāhati. wa-baʿḍuhum yaǧʿaluhā muʿarrafatan ʿalaman, wa-hiya ismu š-šamsi l-latī taʿbuduhā.* "(I swear) by that which makes the goddess move. Some of them define it (the goddess) and make it as a proper name and this is the name of the sun which they worshipped" (34).

At any rate *ʾlhtn* is a proper name for a divinity representing a female deity. It may be considered and understood in association with the Sabaean deity *ʾlhn* (35). The goddess *ʾlhtn* is the feminine form of *ʾlhn*. According to this fact it may be assumed that *ʾlhtn* was the spouse of *ʾlhn*, but no concrete information is available.

The phrase *ʿlhy bʿlt šhrn* is typical of the inscriptions of amulets. *bʿlt šhrn* designates at any rate the wearer of the amulet since this is preceeded by *ʿlhy* like other amulets which have the starting formula *ḥgr*. The writing of *ʿlhy* in this form is Hadhramitic and has the equivalent *ʿly* "on, upon etc." in Sabaic (36). Most of them have the following constructions: an amulet designation (*ḥgr*)+divine name+*ʿlhy*/*ʿly*+personal name (wearer). However, it is difficult to decide about the identity of *bʿlt šhrn* "lady or mistress of *šhrn*". Whether she is the mistress of a temple or a region called *šhrn* is ambiguous. But, the power or the protection of the Ilāhatān was to strengthen the potentiality of the lady who wore this amulet.

bʿlt šhrn seems to be a divine name. Occasionally, the word *bʿlt* "lady, mistress" appears several times as an epithet for the sun goddess in South Arabia, especially in Sabaic. If this can be taken as the correct interpretation, Baʿlat Šahrān is then a female deity which occurs for the first time in the South Arabian inscriptions. These epithets are mainly interpreted as *bʿlt*+place name or temple name (37). Furthermore, this means that *šhrn* could be a temple name or place name and such names are attested in South Arabian inscriptions. *šhrn* means "month, moon or moon god" in West-Semitic (38). Notably the word *šhrn* is associated with *šhr* which is, however, a form of the moon god. For instance, the moon god *šhr* occurs among the Aramaeans and Southern Arabs (39). The epithet *šhrn* is attested in Minaean inscriptions, e.g. *wdm šhrn* "Wadd the moon" (40). Apparently, the word *šhrn* is a general designation for the moon deity in South Arabia. This deity occurs in particular as Almaqah in Saba, ʿAmm in Qataban, Siyān in Hadhramaut and Wadd in Maʿīn.

Moreover, the word *šhrn* in our amulet could be interpreted in conjunction with the Midianite amulets mentioned in the

Old Testament. These amulets are called *śaharōn* (pl. *śahᵃronīm*) which means literally "little moon or crescent". The Midianite chiefs are described as having worn amulets of protection in battle in the days of Gideon (41). It is interesting that the Midianites also hung such amulets around the necks of their camels. These crescent-amulets must be the same as those found in archaeological sites in Arabia and Palestine. This suggests the possibility that the term *šhrn* could have the meaning of the object itself, but such a meaning is not attested in South Arabian inscriptions.

If the possibility that *bᶜlt šhrn* as a goddess can be accepted, and because it is difficult to accept that the power (*ḥwl*) of the goddess (*ᵓlhtn*) was over the supposed goddess called *bᶜlt šhrn*, the text could be divided into two sentences and read as follows:

1. *ḥwl ᵓlhtn* "The (magical) power of Ilāhatān".
2. *ᶜlhy bᶜlt šhrn* "(Protection) of Baᶜlat Šahrān".

These two sentences comprise two sayings. The second saying *ᶜlhy bᶜlt šhrn* means that the wearer of the amulet relies or depends upon the goddess. Such sayings are well known in Arabic, for example, *ᶜalā Allāh* "(my protection be) upon god" or *tawakkaltu ᶜala llāhi* "I entrust in god" (42). If this identification of two different goddesses on this amulet is possible, then the goddess (*ᵓlhtn*) seems to have been an epithet for the sun goddess, whereas Baᶜlat Šahrān in this case might be a goddess associated with a moon deity. But this remains hypothetical and I would rather adhere to the first interpretation that *bᶜlt šhrn* describes only the wearer of the amulet, and the whole inscription translates as "the (magical) power of the goddess be upon the wearer (*bᶜlt*) of the amulet (*šhrn*)".

Goddesses and gods are mentioned side by side in the Hadhramitic inscription RES 2693. This inscription gives us some information about gods and goddesses of Shabwa which makes it relevant to our inscribed amulet. In line 5 the goddesses of the temple Alīm are mentioned (*wᵓlhty mḥrms ᵓlm*). In line 6 we read: *wᵓlhy wᵓlhty hgrhn šbwt* "and the gods and the goddesses of the city Shabwat". Alīm was the temple of the Hadhramitic moon deity Siyān (*syn*), but our information about goddesses in Hadhramaut is still limited (43).

In conclusion, the first interpretation of the amulet suggested above is the most plausible one, and therefore may be the most preferable.

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